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Abandon elk winter feed grounds

The Montana ranching community suffered a considerable blow last week with the announcement that the state's brucellosis-free status will be revoked, after a case of the disease was discovered in a Paradise Valley cattle herd.

The revocation will restrict where and how Montana cattle can be sold out of state, and it is estimated the loss will cost the state's livestock-growing industry in excess of $6 million a year - $1,000 to $1,500 for an individual rancher with a 300-cow operation.

The disease has been the source of bitter controversy because of its presence in a significant percentage of Yellowstone National Park bison. Brucellosis has been used as justification for severely limiting park bison movements outside of the park — through the hazing and slaughtering of errant animals, a practice that has attracted negative attention nationally and left Montanans bitterly divided.

But make no mistake: The issue is not park bison. It is, however, about the larger presence of the disease in Yellowstonearea wildlife. And the loss of Montana's brucellosis-free status is a serious development that raises the level of urgency with which this disease should be treated.

Brucellosis also is present in wild elk herds — both inside and outside the park — though it is found in a lower percentage of elk than in the bison. State and federal livestock officials have not named a culprit in the Paradise Valley case, but the evidence suggests the disease most likely came from elk that the rancher in question says have come into contact with his cattle herd.

So why aren't elk given the same treatment as bison? Because it would be impossible to haze, round up, capture or slaughter wholesale these far more numerous and elusive animals. And, besides, elk have powerful advocates — hunters — who would not stand for such a strategy.

Why not, then, treat the cattle, so they are immune to the disease? This is done. In fact, the Paradise Valley rancher in whose herd the brucellosis case turned up had treated his cattle with vaccine. But the only known vaccine is of limited effectiveness.

There are only two conceivable remedies to this dilemma: An effective, affordable, 100 percent effective vaccine, or the disease must be eliminated from wildlife populations.

The former has been and continues to be pursued by researchers; the latter will not be possible until the elk winter feed grounds in Wyoming are abandoned.

Because of the lack of winter range and the insistence of hunting interests that artificially high elk populations be maintained, Wyoming wildlife officials have been feeding "wild" elk in winter for going on a century. This practice concentrates large numbers of animals in small areas, creating "incubators" that ensure significant proportions of elk herds in all of the Yellowstone region remain infected with any disease present in the population. Absent the feed grounds, it is likely that, over time, the disease would recede to background levels or disappear altogether in wildlife.

Through careful monitoring, Montana will regain its brucellosis-free status in the next few years. But, until the Wyoming feed grounds are abandoned — or until a 100 percent effective vaccine is developed — the loss of the state's brucellosis-free status is likely to recur.